

July 15, 2005- American Veterans Win Thanks to Work of Rahall

AMERICAN VETERANS WIN THANKS TO WORK OF RAHALL

WASHINGTON, DC - Veterans across West Virginia and the Nation celebrated victory today when the White House finally agreed with U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) and his colleagues in asking for an additional \$2 billion in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). "This is a great victory for all veterans in America; and I am glad that my colleagues and I were able to help make it possible," said Rahall. "I have said all along that we have an obligation to ensure funds for our veterans' health care are available and it gives me great pleasure to see it happen."

When the VA announced its budget shortfall, Rahall and his colleagues continued their ongoing work to increase funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Even when it became clear that the VA would have a funding shortfall for 2005 of over \$1 billion House Republican leadership ignored the issue and did not move to increase funding. Rahall and many of his colleagues focused their efforts on ensuring the VA receives a boost to their funding for 2005 and 2006.

"The recent budget fiasco could have been avoided if only compassion had been more forthcoming in the many months prior when Democrats and Republicans sought additional funding," said Rahall. "The Republican leadership, instead, fired their chairman because he tried to do the right thing and they ignored the Democrats plea for more funding."

The White House asked for \$300 million additional funding for 2005, to go along with the additional \$975 million approved last month, and reach the goal Rahall and his colleagues were working for of \$1.3 billion additional dollars for the 2005 budget shortfall. Responding to calls for an increase in the VA's 2006 budget, the White House also asked for \$1.7 billion additional dollars for 2006, which Rahall stressed was vital to ensuring veterans received sufficient health care.

"Our veterans are the heart and soul of this Nation, they have fought to protect our Nation in times of war and times of peace and our Nation must always help protect our veterans in their life after military service," said Rahall. "I am glad that the White House has seen the light and agreed to increase funding for our veterans to the level that my colleagues and I have been calling for."

Last month, during the fight for additional veterans' health care funding, Rahall and his colleagues suffered a setback when Republicans on the Rules Committee voted against taking care of the budget shortfall and later when the Republican leadership in the entire House defeated a similar measure. The Republican leadership opposed giving Congressman Chet Edwards (D-TX) an up or down vote on his amendment to fix the VA budget shortfall by supplying \$1.3 billion. All Democrats supported Rep. Edwards's amendment.

"We all know that this increase of funding is necessary for the VA to continue to provide its crucial services," said Rahall. "We now have the \$1.3 billion that we originally believed the VA was short. Our veterans ought to receive the funding they need and deserve and I will continue to work to ensure that they do."

The Administration's original budget proposal for the Veterans Affairs Department 2006 budget called for a less than inflation increase for veterans' health care, and also proposed higher co-payments for prescription drugs and VA medical system enrollment fees. Rahall and his colleagues have worked to increase funding since the VA budget was released and revisited their efforts after the shortfall was announced and the additional \$1.7 billion will go a long way towards ensuring veterans receive sufficient health care.

Rahall stressed, however, "This fight is not over. We must continue to work for veterans funding. There are veterans all across southern West Virginia who deserve the best care possible and to make that a reality, we must increase the VA budget and ensure our veterans are the final winners in this budget fiasco."

In a related matter, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee approved legislation that would permanently increase the maximum federally subsidized life insurance payment that families of military personnel could receive if a service member is killed in the line of duty from \$250,000 to \$400,000. As of now, the provision is set to expire on September 30, 2005.

Rahall praised the committee in saying, "I am pleased that the Veterans' Affairs Committee agrees that we must make this increase permanent. I hope that the Republican leadership will bring this bill to the floor of the House for a full vote as soon as possible."